

Testimony to the:
House Transportation Committee

Senate Bill 2121 – In Support
March 18, 2021

Chairman Ruby and members of the House Transportation Committee:

My name is Adam Johnston; I am a resident of West Fargo, an emergency nurse, and the President of the North Dakota Emergency Nurses Association. I am in support of Senate Bill 2121.

Others testifying today will present a strong case of statistics and data for you to consider, so I won't spend much time on those. However, prior to deciding whether I support a bill, I consider three questions, and I want to share the evidence-based answers that led me to take action on this.

Question #1: What is the ultimate goal of the bill?

Answer: The goal of SB 2121 is to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries from motor vehicle collisions, and to lessen the financial impact those injuries have on our state.

Question #2: Will this bill accomplish those goals?

Answer: The science says yes. States that enacted primary enforcement seat belt laws saw an average 7% decrease in motor vehicle collision death rates. We also know that medical bills are 55% higher for unbelted victims, and those costs impact insurance premiums, taxes, and overall healthcare costs.

Question #3: Do we really need this to accomplish those goals?

Answer: In 2019, there were only 7 states with lower seat belt use rates than North Dakota. Only 4 states and the District of Columbia had seat belt use rates greater than 95%. The commonalities in those 4 high-performing states are primary enforcement seat belt laws, and lower rates of motor vehicle deaths than states without primary enforcement. SB 2121 is an important part of the strategy to improve those statistics in North Dakota.

I submit testimony today because I see the impact of seat belt use (or the lack thereof) on a regular basis as an emergency nurse, and I'd like to share one story to help you see a small sliver of what I see.

A couple years ago, I was the primary trauma nurse scheduled on the overnight shift. I learned that I would be caring for a male passenger in his 20s with serious injuries from a motor vehicle collision. He had stopped breathing on scene, was intubated, and CPR was in progress. I'll refer to him as Dylan.

By the time Dylan arrived to my trauma room, his pulse had returned, and a ventilator was set up to breathe for him. Our team worked for about an hour to stabilize him. Finally, our physician had a moment to update Dylan's mom and to prepare her for what she would soon see. As she walked into the room, I could tell she understood the reality of the situation. The first thing she said to me was "I need you to know he is an organ donor. [...] If he can't survive, please make sure he can donate." We stabilized Dylan and admitted him to the ICU, but ultimately, he was pronounced brain-dead. He did end up donating most of his organs.

I think about Dylan a lot. When I see the donor stamp on my driver's license. When I walk by that particular trauma room at work. And when I get in a car and put my own seat belt on. I've thought about Dylan over and over while listening to the committee and floor discussions this session (regarding this bill and House Bill 1257) and while preparing this testimony.

I don't know if stronger seat belt laws would have saved Dylan's life. But I do know that primary-enforcement all-occupant laws are proven to decrease deaths and serious injuries in accidents like Dylan's. With Senate Bill 2121, each of you, and each representative in this assembly, has the opportunity to make a change that will save lives in North Dakota. In fact, by passing this bill, you have the chance to save more lives each year from motor vehicle crashes than I do as an emergency nurse. If I had that chance, I wouldn't hesitate to take it, and I hope you do the same.

Please vote DO PASS on Senate Bill 2121.

Sincerely Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Johnston', written in a cursive style.

Adam R. Johnston, BAN, RN, CEN, CPEN, NPD-BC
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